

# Venezuela Congress OKs Chavez's reforms

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CARACAS, Venezuela --

Venezuela's National Assembly, dominated by allies of President Hugo Chavez, gave unanimous initial approval Tuesday to constitutional reforms that would allow him to run for re-election and possibly govern for decades to come.

Assembly President Cilia Flores said Chavez's proposed changes to the constitution, including the lifting of presidential term limits, were approved by all 167 lawmakers after about six hours of debate.

Final approval is expected within two or three months, and voters will then decide whether to approve the changes in a referendum.

The assembly has been solidly pro-Chavez since the opposition boycotted a 2005 vote and had been expected to sign off on the changes proposed by Chavez in Tuesday's first reading. The reforms, if approved, would extend presidential terms from six to seven years and allow Chavez to run again in 2013.

Government opponents have attacked the reforms, saying they will weaken democracy by permitting Chavez to become a lifelong leader like his ally Fidel Castro of Cuba.

Chavez, a former paratroop commander who was re-elected by a wide margin in December on promises to steer the country toward socialism, says the changes will give Venezuelans greater decision-making power and aid the transfer of billions of dollars from Venezuela's foreign reserves into social programs.

Ismael Garcia, one of the assembly's few dissenting voices, criticized pro-Chavez lawmakers for excluding opposition groups from the discussion, arguing that Venezuelans of all political leanings must be included in the debate before the proposed reforms are put to a national vote.

Garcia, who voted for the initial approval despite his criticism, said issues "such as the economic path of a new society" must be discussed.

"This isn't just any debate," he said.

Other reforms would create new types of property to be managed by cooperatives, give neighborhood-based "communal councils" administrative responsibilities usually reserved for elected officials and create "a popular militia" that would form part of the military. The workday would also be reduced to six hours.

Flores said government-friendly lawmakers have the right to approve the reforms without changing the proposal that Chavez presented last week.

"We are not imposing anything," she told state television.

Earlier Tuesday, former Chavez mentor Luis Miquilena urged Venezuelans to reject the proposed constitutional changes.

Miquilena, who headed a popularly elected, pro-Chavez assembly that drafted Venezuela's existing constitution, called his former ally's new reform proposal "a constitutional fraud" aimed at giving him "perpetual power."

Miquilena, an 88-year-old former labor leader, once was commonly referred to as Chavez's closest adviser. But he quit his Cabinet in 2002 and has periodically criticized the president since then.